

Sexuality in East Asian Astrology: The Lot of Eros.

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ABSTRACT: How did astrologers in China and Japan understand sexuality? Was it regarded as a mutable preference or was it something predetermined based on the nativity of an individual? This presentation will argue that East Asian astrology, under the likely influence of Dorotheus of Sidon's material in translation, conceived of sexuality as predetermined based on astrological configurations in an individual's natal horoscope. A fragmentary work in the Daoist canon offers an overview of the astrological concept of lots (known also as Arabic parts today), one of which is the lot of eros that deals with sexual desire and love lives. I will show that astrologers in medieval East Asia understood desires for men, women, or both genders, through a lens of determinism, which importantly demonstrates a rare example of a belief that such desires are inherent from birth.

Introduction

In this paper I want to point out that the concept of predetermined sexuality is observed in horoscopic literature in China from the ninth century. The idea that one's sexual inclinations are immutable and inherent from birth due to predetermined causes is apparently unprecedented in China until the introduction of horoscopy from abroad during the latter half of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE).

Buddhists initially introduced some forms of Indian astrology, albeit heavily modified once it was translated into Chinese, from the fourth to eighth centuries CE. This was then followed by the translation of horoscopy into Chinese only a generation or two afterward, starting around the year 800.¹

The casting and reading of horoscopes became quite popular amongst the intelligentsia of the ninth century. This trend continued into the

¹ Jeffrey Kotyk, 'The Sinicization of Indo-Iranian Astrology in Medieval China', *Sino-Platonic Papers* 282 (2018): pp. 1–95. Bill M. Mak, 'Yusi Jing – A treatise of "Western" Astral Science in Chinese and its versified version *Xitian yusi jing*', *SCIAMVS* 15 (2014): 105–169.

following centuries. Many astrological doctrines, which were originally Hellenistic in origin, are attested in Chinese translation from the ninth century, such as the twelve houses, triplicity rulers, annual profections, sect, and lots. Although we have some manuals and altogether three extant horoscopes from China and Japan, those original texts translated during the late period of the Tang Dynasty that were based on material stemming from Dorotheus are only available in fragments today.

The main extant text which relates information about the lots in Chinese is found in the Daoist canon of 1445, although whether the text was strictly ‘Daoist’ in character is questionable based on the content, the bulk of which appears to have been in large part extracted from the earlier Chinese translation of Dorotheus. The extant text is only partially preserved in the canon, while the remaining fascicles have been lost. The title can be translated as ‘Scripture of the Spiritual Terrace’.² There are other elements in the text that are not Hellenistic in origin, but rather appear to reflect either Indian or Indo-Iranian elements, albeit Sinicized, such as the content related to the lunar stations (e.g., converting the parameters of *nakṣatras* into a Chinese astronomical framework).

In this paper I will look at how sexuality is treated in this text. I argue that this is a unique instance in which we observe a foreign divinatory practice introduced into Chinese a new framework for interpreting sexuality. This not only highlights the significance of astrology in Chinese intellectual history, but also demonstrates that the art went beyond predicting worldly fortunes and disasters. Even the formation of inherent personal qualities was subject to the stars. It was believed that a skilled astrologer could even predict these features in a person based on their birth chart. The passages I cite below are extracted from the printed Daoist canon (*Daozang* 288, 5: pp. 26c-27a), with reference also to the digitized (Unicode) text on ctext.org.

The Lots in China

The lots are known as ‘flying assignments’ in Chinese.³ The etymology behind this particular term is uncertain. As Greenbaum explains, ‘The Greek word for a lot, κλῆρος, probably derives from the shard of stone or wood used to cast lots. It seems to be related to the verb κλάω, “break”’.⁴ The Chinese word does not reflect this meaning, but the term was likely

² Chn. *Lingtai jing* 靈臺經.

³ Chn. *feipei* 飛配.

⁴ Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum, *The Daimon in Hellenistic Astrology: Origins and Influence* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 280.

translated from another language, such as Middle Persian. In any case, the formulas for the lots are mostly identical to those given by Dorotheus, with some exceptions. For example, the lot of fortune is calculated as follows in Chinese: ‘If a diurnal birth, from the Sun, if a nocturnal birth, from the Moon, and then cast it out from the eastern [horizon] to the very end’.⁵ This means the distance between the Sun and the Moon in the chart is measured in the direction of the zodiac signs (counter-clockwise), and that same distance then is measured from the Ascendant (the first house). The end point of that distance is then defined as the lot of fortune. If the chart is nocturnal, then the formula is reversed (Moon to Sun). Specific judgments can then be made based on the triplicity or domicile rulers, or if any planets (benefic or malefic) are present at the lot.

The ‘lot of eros’ in Chinese is literally translated as ‘house of desire’.⁶ Astrological vocabulary in Chinese from this period reflects whole-sign configurations, hence the whole zodiac sign and house/place in which the lot falls becomes wholly associated with the theme of the lot, rather than an exact point calculated by degree. The formula for eros in Chinese is literally defined in the following manner: ‘If diurnal, from the “house of appearance” to the “house of spirit & cultivation”, whereas if a nocturnal birth, reverse this, and then cast it from the eastern horizon’.⁷ The “house of appearance” refers to the twelfth house in Chinese horoscopy. The twelfth house did not denote disaster in this case, as one might expect, but rather it indicated the formative features of the native.⁸ The formula for the lot of eros is therefore measured from the twelfth house to the lot of spirit. Dorotheus, in contrast, gives the formula as lot of fortune to spirit.⁹

The Lot of Eros

Turning to the interpretations of the lot of eros in Chinese, we initially read, ‘If [the lot] is in the signs of Taurus, Aries, Pisces, or Capricorn, there will

⁵ 晝生從日，夜生從月，從東出配之至終。

⁶ Chn. *qingyu gong* 情慾宮。

⁷ 白日從相貌宮至精魂增修宮，夜生反此，東出配之。

⁸ For a discussion on the issue of the twelfth house in Chinese horoscopy, see Jeffrey Kotyk, ‘Chinese and English Horoscopy in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: The Astrological Doctrines of the Twelve Houses and Lot of Fortune in *Xingxue dacheng* 星學大成 by Wan Minying 萬民英 (1521–1603) and *Christian Astrology* by William Lilly (1602–1681)’, *International Journal of Divination & Prognostication* 1 (2019): pp. 27–28.

⁹ See table in Benjamin N. Dykes, *Dorotheus of Sidon: Carmen Astrologicum, The ‘Umar al-Tabarī Translation* (Minneapolis: The Cazimi Press, 2017), p. 14.

be much desire. It will especially be so if Venus is seen [there in the lot]'.¹⁰ Pingree's translation of Dorotheus (II.7) also classifies these four as signs of desire: 'If Venus is one of the signs of desire, which abound in lust (they are Aries, Capricorn, Pisces, and Taurus ...)'.¹¹

This idea that desire would be connected to zodiac signs would have been entirely new to the Chinese in the ninth century. Although zodiac signs as vaguely defined asterisms were known from Buddhist literature in earlier times in China, the astrologer in this instance predicts the level of desire—amorous or sexual—experienced by the native, based on a few factors in their nativity. The more remarkable statement follows this line. We read the following:

If Mercury is in Aries or Scorpio [and is conjunct with the lot of eros], and Mars is in [the Mercurial signs Gemini and Virgo], [like] mandarin ducks in a blossoming tree, they will enjoy male appeal. If Venus and the Moon are in the fourth [house], they will desire both men and women. It makes for the appearance of witches. If Venus is stationary, they will consort with many. If Saturn or Jupiter [Mars?] are overcoming [Venus], they will desire the six types of animals.¹² If Mars and Venus [are conjunct in the lot], they will be perpetually unsatisfied in their desires. If Venus is in the eighth [house], they will enjoy male and female appeals. It is the same if Mars in the ninth [house].¹³

There is a strong parallel with Dorotheus, but in the translation by Pingree it is the lot of marriage, not eros, in which this configuration applies.

¹⁰ 若得牛羊魚磨等宮，多情慾，如見金尤甚。

¹¹ David Pingree, *Dorothei Sidonii Carmen astrologicum: interpretationem arabicam in linguam anglicam versam una cum Dorothei fragmentis et graecis et latinis* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1976), p. 206.

¹² *Mu* 木 (Jupiter) is likely a typographical error for *huo* 火 (Mars). We would expect the other malefic, Mars, to be paired with Saturn in this sort of configuration, not the benefic Jupiter.

¹³ 若水在羊蝎，火在[?]，花樹鴛鴦好男色。金月在第四，男女俱姪，為巫現。若金留，與衆通。若土木尅，則姪於六畜。火與金，姪常不足。金在第八，好男女性。火在第九亦同。 Note that [] indicates an interpolation into the English translation inserted by me. There are two characters missing following 'Mars is in ...', but based on Pingree's translation, I would infer the missing words are Gemini and Virgo. The CBETA digitized text misreads *xie* 蝎 (Scorpio) as *jie* 竭, but the former reading is clearly given in the printed canon.

Nevertheless, Mercury in a Martian sign and Mars in a Mercurial one is also interpreted as an indication of homosexuality. Pingree's translation (II.7) reads, 'If you find Mars in the house of Mercury and Mercury in the house of Mars, then he will be covetous of males'.¹⁴

This is a remarkable instance in premodern China of non-heteronormative sexualities (homosexuality, bisexuality, and zoophilia) not only mentioned in one place, but moreover it is a unique example in which such behaviours are framed as inherent and predetermined from birth, rather than being learnt or habituated preferences.

'Mandarin ducks' are a literary allusion to an amorous couple, which in the present case would be a reference to a male-male couple.¹⁵ We can infer that the intended client is male, because otherwise a female client in a heteronormative context would not 'enjoy male appeal', since it would just be expected. The word in Chinese literally reads as 'male colours', which denotes 'male appeal' or, more precisely, erotic acts with men.¹⁶ This was the case especially in the Japanese context where the word was inherited from China. Porath explains that in premodern East Asia the expression generally denoted male-male love. His study also shows that a separate, more definite, phrase in China was 'pushing a brick' as an allusion to intercourse between men.¹⁷ In a separate example, however, we can see 'male appeal' used in a heterosexual context. The Buddhist monk Fazang (643–712) in his commentary on the bodhisattva precepts (i.e., the ethical vows of Mahāyāna Buddhists) writes, 'Selling of appeal refers to being in a brothel and selling "female appeal" to men or selling "male appeal" to women'.¹⁸ Fazang does not refer to same-sex intercourse, but the above passage I believe is referring to intercourse between men, since the presumed client is male. The parallel doctrine in Dorotheus is also strong.

More shocking to readers at the time would have been the reference to zoophilia (bestiality). The reference to the 'six animals' (horses, cattle, sheep, chickens, dogs, and swine) is not strictly limited to these species,

¹⁴ Pingree, *Dorothei Sidonii Carmen astrologicum*, 206.

¹⁵ Chn. *yuan yang* 鴛鴦.

¹⁶ Chn. *nan se* 男色 (Jpn. *nan shoku*).

¹⁷ Or Porath, 'The Cosmology of Male-Male Love in Medieval Japan: *Nyakudō no kanjinchō* and the Way of Youths', *Journal of Religion in Japan* 4 (2015): 247, 259. Or Porath, 'Sexuality', in Erica Baffelli, Fabio Rambelli, and Andrea Castiglioni, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Japanese Religions (Bloomsbury Handbooks in Religion)* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 206.

¹⁸ 賣色者, 謂居娼肆賣女色與男, 或賣男色與女. *Fanwang jing pusa jieben shu* 梵網經菩薩戒本疏. *Taishō* 1813, 40: 648a12-13.

but it is a general reference to domesticated animals in general. The concept of zoophilia would not have been entirely unknown to learned readers during the Tang Dynasty. For instance, the mainstream monastic codes of the Buddhist community at the time (a Chinese translation of the codes of the Indian Dharmaguptaka school) relate an incident involving bestiality. In short, a monk is said to have fed a female monkey over time and then fornicated with it. The monk defended himself, saying that the Buddha had only prohibited intercourse with women, but not with animals. The case was reported to the Buddha, who then strictly prohibited all acts of bestiality.¹⁹ Buddhist monks at the time with a basic education in the monastic codes would have at least been aware of this story. Zoophilia, in any case, was not condoned in Chinese society.

We should observe that the team who translated the astrological content related to non-heteronormative sexualities was, in fact, allowed to do this. There was no censorship of this content, which tells us something about the tolerance of the authorities at the time. Hinsch notes that during the Tang period the ‘mingling of cultures produced a society of profound sophistication. With this cultural brilliance came a high regard for sensuality, reflected in many poems of the age as well as in records of homosexuality’.²⁰ Zoophilia, conversely, would not have been received well, but the text itself does not prescribe the acts. Astrology dealt with predictive claims, rather than prescribing anything, so it would have been regarded as simply a utility for analysing a person. Pointing out the propensity for a type of desire was not the same as encouraging it. Also in the Islamic world, Abū Ma‘šār touched on topics of homosexuality, for example associating Venus with ‘much love-making of various kinds, having anal intercourse and Lesbianism’.²¹ Astrology in both cultures had the liberty to discuss sexuality without necessarily making any moral claims one way or another.

We read further comments about how to predict outcomes of the native’s love life. For instance, ‘If Venus is in Leo, they will enjoy snatching away the wives and consorts of men. If Venus is in Cancer or Capricorn, there will be sordid acts’.²² The meaning of ‘sordid acts’ is left undefined, so we are left only to imagine what that meant. Another line appears to denote

¹⁹ *Sì fēn lǜ* 四分律. *Taishō* 1428, 22: p. 571a4-24.

²⁰ Bret Hinsch, *The Male Homosexual Tradition in China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), pp. 77-78.

²¹ Keiji Yamamoto and Charles Burnett, trans., *The Great Introduction to Astrology by Abū Ma‘šār* (Leiden: Brill), p. 811.

²² 金在獅子, 好奪人妻妾. 金在蟹磨, 有穢行.

adultery: ‘Also, if Venus is in the seventh place, with Saturn and Mars conjunct, they will conceive of maliciousness, and privately consort with outsiders, not distinguishing good and evil’.²³

Finally, we read what appears to be a reference to consanguineous marriage: ‘If Venus is in the house of office [the tenth house], with the Moon in the estate [the fourth house], they will take a relative for a wife. If the position is strong, then it will be auspicious.’²⁴ The ‘house of office’ is perhaps meant to indicate the midheaven. The Arabic translation of Dorotheus (II.26) states something very similar: ‘If Venus is in the ascendant or midheaven or aspects the Moon, then it indicates his marriage to one of his relatives’.²⁵ This parallel further confirms the influence of Dorotheus in the Chinese tradition of astrology, but it also shows the sort of diversity of outcomes that astrologers could predict for their clients.

Conclusion

To sum up, astrologers in East Asia were evidently influenced in their views on sexuality and marriage by ideas derived from Dorotheus in Chinese translation. We can conclude from the above examples that the strong parallels between the Chinese text and Dorotheus, at least in the Arabic translation, show that Hellenistic ideas impacted Chinese astrology and by extension at least part of the intellectual culture from the ninth century. Astrology was a link between the Mediterranean world and China, with intermediaries in India and Iran. The integrity of astrological doctrines was still largely preserved even after having passed through a few languages and cultures. The highly technical nature of astrology, in my mind, best explains why this could happen.

Although the astrological idea that sexuality is predetermined from birth based on planetary configurations is remarkable in a premodern Chinese context, whether this was a widely held idea amongst commoners or even the elites is uncertain. Nevertheless, in light of the popularity of horoscopy from the late period of the Tang Dynasty onward, we can imagine that many intellectuals would have been at least exposed to these ideas. Further investigation into references to astrological concepts by authors of the period would potentially shed further light on the extent to which

²³ 又金在第七位, 土火同宮, 浮惡毒, 與外人私通, 不擇好惡。

²⁴ 金在官宮, 月在田宅, 合取親戚為妻。其位高強即吉。

²⁵ Pingree, *Dorothei Sidonii Carmen astrologicum*, p. 229. Dykes translates this line as follows: ‘And if Venus was in the Ascendant or Midheaven, or [and] she looked at the Moon, then she indicates his marrying one of his relatives’. Dykes, *Dorotheus of Sidon*, p. 167.

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horoscopy was accepted and practised by intellectuals and statesmen, and moreover how these ideas might have shaped views on human personalities and characteristics.